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Promotion and protection of the rights of children

The girl child

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 66/140. It contains a brief overview of international obligations and global commitments with respect to the girl child, emanating from human rights treaties, international conferences and legal and policy developments. It addresses progress and challenges in multiple areas and specifically considers the situation of and response to girls living in child-headed households.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 66/140, entitled "The girl child", in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on its implementation. The report was to emphasize fulfilment of the rights of girls in child-headed households, with a view to assessing the impact of the resolution on the well-being of the girl child. For the purpose of its preparation, notes verbales requesting relevant information on implementation of resolution 66/140 were sent to Member States and United Nations agencies, programmes and departments. Requests were also sent to key non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to promote girls' rights.

2. The present report follows the 2011 report submitted by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly at its sixty-sixth session (A/66/257), which emphasized progress and challenges in addressing the issue of child marriage and forced marriage. Section II outlines international and regional frameworks with respect to the rights of girls and key obligations and commitments of States in this respect. Section III describes the situation of the girl child and notes challenges in the areas raised in General Assembly resolution 66/140. Section IV analyses the situation of girls living in child-headed households. Section V notes progress towards fulfilment of the rights of girls and section VI contains recommendations for action.

II. Legal/normative framework and global commitments

A. Human rights treaties and other international conventions

3. The realization of the rights of children, including girl children, is the obligation of every State, as established by a comprehensive international legal framework. In addition to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocols thereto, which outline a comprehensive set of rights to be enjoyed "without discrimination of any kind",[1] including discrimination on the grounds of sex, all fundamental human rights treaties include provisions confirming the principle of non-discrimination and equality between men and women, boys and girls. Among these treaties, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is of particular importance, as it relates directly to the situation and well-being of the girl child.

4. In addition to human rights treaties, legal obligations are entrenched in binding labour law instruments, including the 1973 Minimum Age Convention (No. 138), the 1999 Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) and the 2011 Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189) of the International Labour Organization (ILO). This legal framework is further strengthened by regional human rights instruments, such as the 2005 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

5. During the reporting period, the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted four general comments aiming at interpreting the Convention and providing guidance to States on its implementation: general comment No. 14, on article 3 para. 1, the right of the child to have his or her interests taken as a primary consideration;

[1] See United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1577, No. 27531, art. 2.

general comment No. 15, on article 24, the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health; general comment No. 16, on State obligations regarding the impact of the business sector on children's rights; and general comment No. 17, on article 31, the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts.

6. The Committee on the Rights of the Child makes specific reference, in general comment No. 15, to gender-based discrimination as being particularly pervasive, affecting a wide range of outcomes from female infanticide/foeticide to discriminatory infant and young child-feeding practices, gender stereotyping and access to services. The Committee notes in general comment No. 14, on the right of the child to have his or her interests assessed and taken as a primary consideration, that, although preservation of religious and cultural values and traditions as part of the child's identity must be considered, practices inconsistent or incompatible with the rights established in the Convention are not in the child's best interests.

7. The difficulties faced by girls in terms of enjoying their rights to rest, leisure, play and recreational activities are also acknowledged in general comment No. 17. The Committee recognizes that these challenges arise, particularly in adolescence, due to domestic responsibilities, protective concerns of parents, lack of facilities and cultural assumptions that limit the expectations and behaviour of girls. Although general comment No. 16, on State obligations regarding the impact of business enterprises on children's rights, does not specifically focus on girls, it nonetheless identifies phenomena of which girls are likely to become victims, such as sexualization in the media and sexual abuse and exploitation through the Internet and in the context of travel and tourism.

8. On 20 December 2012, the General Assembly adopted resolution 67/146, in which it urged States to condemn all harmful practices that affect women and girls, in particular female genital mutilations. It also urged them to take all necessary measures, including enforcing legislation, raising awareness and allocating sufficient resources, to protect women and girls from this form of violence.

B. International conferences, intergovernmental bodies and related commitments

9. Member States have made extensive commitments in international forums to eliminate discrimination against the girl child. These forums have included the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. Both the Cairo Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action include strategic objectives on issues ranging from elimination of all forms of discrimination against the girl child and negative cultural attitudes and practices affecting girls, to promotion and protection of the rights of girls in education, health and nutrition, child labour, violence and participation in economic and political life.

10. In its resolution 64/145, entitled "The girl child", the General Assembly reaffirmed other outcomes of major United Nations summits and conferences relevant to the girl child, including the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"; the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development; the declaration adopted by the Commission on the Status of

Women at its forty-ninth session; and the agreed conclusions adopted by the Commission at its fifty-first session, under the theme, "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child".

11. At its fifty-seventh session, the Commission on the Status of Women adopted agreed conclusions on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls. The Commission urged States to abolish practices and legislation that perpetuate and condone violence against women and girls. It also called upon them to take specific steps to address violence against women and girls in the home, the workplace, educational institutions and public places.

12. The report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Human Rights Council, entitled "Thematic study on the issue of violence against women and girls and disability" (A/HRC/20/5), indicates that women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to violence during situations of conflict and natural disasters, which may force migration or displacement. Disasters compound the social effects of disability, especially for girls and women.

13. At its twenty-first session, in 2012, the Human Rights Council considered the joint report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children on prevention of and responses to violence against children within the juvenile justice system (A/HRC/21/25). The report noted that, while girls were a minority in the juvenile justice system, they required special protection. The report cited the 2008 report by the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (A/HRC/7/3), in which he stated that custodial violence against women, including girls, very often included rape and other forms of sexual violence, such as threats of rape, touching, "virginity testing", being stripped naked, invasive body searches, insults and humiliations of a sexual nature.

III. Discrimination and the situation of the girl child

A. Poverty

14. Gender discrimination manifests itself in different ways, according to cultures and country contexts, but invariably serves as an economic impediment. In some parts of the world, girls are more burdened by household poverty than boys. They may be taken out of school, forced to work in inappropriate environments or married early, in order to ease the hardship of their families.

15. Poverty can be an impetus for migration to secure or improve employment opportunities. However, migration can also increase girls' vulnerability by reducing access to support systems or social and health services. In other cases, male siblings or parents migrate, leaving girls to care for siblings left behind.

B. Education

16. Throughout the last decade, progress in education has been significant. According to the 2012 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Youth and*

Skills — Putting Education to Work, of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), globally, the number of primary school-age children out-of-school fell from 108 million to 61 million between 1999 and 2010; in developing countries, the proportion of girls in the out-of-school population decreased from 58 per cent to 53 per cent.

17. However, global averages do not reflect the stark disparities between regions and countries. In spite of their unprecedented progress in school enrolment and completion, countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia lag behind other countries.

18. According to the same report, global data also reveal that the decrease in out-of-school children occurred mainly up to 2004; the actual rate of progress has since decelerated. The number of children completing primary education has not kept pace with increasing enrolment, and as many as 250 million children could be failing to learn to read or write by the time they should reach grade four.

19. In the report, it was stated that, while more girls and boys are completing primary education, the growing demand for secondary education poses a serious challenge for countries with limited resources. In sub-Saharan Africa, about one quarter of the children who complete primary school are unable to go on to secondary education. As a result, over 34 million adolescent girls of lower secondary age were not in school in 2010.[2]

C. Health

20. In some countries where cultural norms favour sons over daughters, mortality rates are relatively higher among girls than boys. Although it is normal for more boys to be born than girls, some countries have a substantial deficit in the ratio of girls to boys born, which may be the result of prenatal sex selection.

21. Complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death among adolescent girls,[3] and they have limited access to and use of contraception. In developing countries overall, 22 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 who are married or in union use contraceptives, versus 61 per cent of married girls and women aged 15 to 49 years.[4] Moreover, young mothers are less equipped to care for their children than adult mothers, and their children are more likely to experience adverse outcomes.

22. As many as 18 per cent of children and adolescents in low- and middle-income countries suffer from poor mental health. Girls in particular suffer from anxiety and mood disorders.[5]

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[2] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Global Education Digest: Opportunities Lost — The Impact of Grade Repetition and Early School Leaving*, 2012.

[3] UNICEF, *Progress for Children: A Report Card on Adolescence*, No. 10, April 2012 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.12.XX.2).

[4] UNFPA, *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*, 2012.

[5] Vikram Patel and others, "Promoting child and adolescent mental health in low and middle income countries", *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 49, No. 3 (March 2008), pp. 313-334.

D. HIV and AIDS

23. Approximately 34 million people were living with HIV worldwide in 2011, and an estimated 2.1 million of them were adolescents aged 10 to 19. The burden is particularly severe in eastern and southern Africa, where an estimated 17.2 million people were living with HIV, including 1.3 million adolescents,[6] of whom approximately 62 per cent were girls.[7] In eastern and southern Africa, young women aged 15 to 24 were even more vulnerable to HIV in 2011, with prevalence rates twice as high in young women (4.3 per cent) as in young men (1.9 per cent). In some countries in southern Africa, prevalence rates among young women were proportionally even higher, at 15.4 per cent, compared to 6.4 per cent for young men.[8]

24. While the greater risk faced by girls is partly attributable to physiology, there is substantive evidence that gender inequality and violence against women are also critical factors. Sexual violence towards girls may increase the risk of transmission, and unequal power relations undermine their capacity to negotiate safer sex.

25. Nearly all countries specifically include women in their national HIV and AIDS strategies, but reports illustrate a varied understanding of what it means to employ a gender perspective. Approaches may not involve women and girls in sufficient or meaningful ways, and fewer than half of countries report that they budget for activities for women and girls or related gender equality initiatives.

E. Food and nutrition

26. Girls and women are physiologically vulnerable to anaemia, which globally affects 47 per cent of children under 5 years of age, 42 per cent of pregnant women and 30 per cent of non-pregnant women.[9] The risk is greatest to the poorest children and to children whose mothers suffered from anaemia or had no education.[10] In adolescence, girls have greater iron needs and increased nutritional demands, and they may experience early pregnancies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, all menstruating girls living in settings where anaemia is highly prevalent (20 per cent or above) need to receive weekly iron-folate supplements. However, no coverage data are available, and implementation programmes are believed to be rare. Anaemia has a negative impact on maternal and infant health and on learning ability. Poor nutrition in utero and during early childhood constrains the capacity of girls to support healthy foetal and infant growth and perpetuates an intergenerational cycle of undernutrition.

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[6] UNAIDS, *Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*, 2012, published estimates.

[7] UNAIDS, *Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*, 2012, unpublished estimates.

[8] UNAIDS, *Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*, 2012, published estimates.

[9] E. McLean and others, *Worldwide Prevalence of Anaemia 1993-2005: WHO Global Database on Anaemia*, WHO, 2008. Available from http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2008/9789241596657_eng.pdf (accessed 3 June 2013).

[10] Y. Balarjan and others, "Anaemia in low-income and middle-income countries", *The Lancet*, vol. 378, issue 9808, 17 December 2011.

F. Water, sanitation and hygiene

27. Exposure to unsafe water and inadequate sanitation (especially open defecation) and hygiene are leading causes of diarrhoea, pneumonia and undernutrition. Girls under 15 years of age are 50 per cent more likely to bear responsibility for collecting water as boys in the same age group.[11] In some cases, girls walk great distances to collect water, increasing their workload and reducing the time they can spend on education and health care.

28. Travelling to remote water points and toilets also makes girls susceptible to harassment and rape. They are particularly vulnerable to dropping out of school, partly because many find it difficult to continue their schooling when toilet and washing facilities are not private, not safe or simply not available. When schools have adequate facilities — particularly toilets and washstands that facilitate menstrual hygiene — a major obstacle to attendance is removed.

G. Violence, exploitation and abuse

29. Violence, exploitation and abuse affect millions of girls worldwide and may occur in their communities, schools, workplaces or homes. Girls are at much greater risk of sexual violence than boys.

30. Both girls and boys suffer from harmful practices. However, due to deeply rooted gender-based discrimination, some harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage, forced marriage, food taboos, forced feeding, honour killings, acid attacks, sexual slavery, stoning, son preference, virginity testing and breast ironing affect girls disproportionately. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimate that approximately one in three young women aged 20 to 24 was married before the age of 18, and around 11 per cent entered into marriage before the age of 15.[12] Although the prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting is in decline, progress is slow and millions of girls are at risk of enduring the procedure. Some harmful practices also reflect ill-perceptions, misconceptions or discriminatory and harmful beliefs towards marginalized girls, such as those with disabilities or albinism and girls accused of witchcraft.

31. Discrimination against girls with disabilities is compounded by stigma and construed inequality. Girls and young women with disabilities are more likely to be institutionalized, forced into marriage, to experience forced sterilization and forced abortion, and to be victims of physical and sexual violence.

H. Work and labour

32. UNICEF estimates that around 23 per cent of all children aged 5 to 14 in the least developed countries are involved in child labour.[13] This is work that is unacceptable, either because the children are too young or because the work they do is unsuitable for a person below the age of 18.

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[11] WHO and UNICEF, *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: 2012 Update*, 2012.

[12] UNICEF, *Committing to Child Survival: A Promise Renewed*, 2012.

[13] UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2013: Children with Disabilities*, 2013.

33. Girls often suffer a double work burden, combining agricultural work with domestic chores. They are also more likely than boys to be engaged in domestic work in a third-party household. The hidden nature of this work increases their risk and sometimes takes the form of servitude or slavery.

I. Humanitarian crises and conflict

34. In humanitarian contexts, risks and their impacts are highly gendered and often shaped by discrimination and cultural values. Parents may arrange early marriages for their daughters as a way of coping with acute household deprivation due to crises, and girls are often forced to beg or engage in transactional sex to meet their own or their families' needs. Crisis-affected girls are more likely than boys to lack food, schooling and health services. Girls with disabilities are often at even greater risk of neglect as a result of their relative invisibility.

35. In the context of armed conflict, the widespread recruitment of girls for non-combatant purposes and abduction for use as sex slaves by armed groups remain a grave concern. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation at the hands of armed forces, community members, humanitarian workers and uniformed personnel.

J. Girls' participation

36. Discrimination against girls restricts their mobility, access to information and opportunities for community and civic engagement. In some countries, girls also have fewer opportunities than boys to establish friendships and networks and are not consulted regarding the important decisions that will shape their lives. The fewer social assets girls have, the less likely they are to benefit from programmes that target children and adolescents.

37. Despite efforts by some Governments to incorporate the principle of respect for the views of children in policies, programmes and legislation, sociocultural norms regarding the role of children and adolescents in society limit, and often prevent, girls and boys from expressing their views on a wide range of issues that affect them. In addition, administrative and legal proceedings are inadequately safeguarded, often lacking mechanisms for ensuring the rights of girls to be heard without discrimination, manipulation or intimidation.

IV. Efforts to fulfil the rights of girls in child-headed households

38. Child-headed households are often associated with the HIV epidemic. Globally, the epidemic has resulted in up to 17.3 million orphans, the vast majority of them in African countries.[14] While orphans have traditionally been cared for by their extended families, the increasing illness and death of parents has overwhelmed family capacities and exhausted social safety nets.

39. Child-headed households exist in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. However, the nature and scale of the phenomenon is unclear, due to a lack

[14] UNAIDS, *Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*, 2012, unpublished estimates.

of relevant data and to definitional ambiguities. National surveys rarely record the number of child-headed households. Where figures exist, they are often derived from broader sets of statistics, such as poverty indicators or statistics relating to orphans, and therefore do not specifically reflect the numbers of children living without parental or adult care. Households may — or may not — be considered as child-headed when parents are still alive but have left their children unsupervised while they live or work elsewhere for long periods; when children live with parents who are terminally or chronically ill and require care themselves; or when children live with extended family members who lack the mental, physical or financial resources to care for them. Therefore, a comprehensive situation analysis does not exist.

40. Moreover, in the vast majority of countries, indicators are not sex-disaggregated. Girls living in child-headed households are neither officially acknowledged nor recognized as a group with specific needs and are not reflected in national policies or planning. The degree to which their rights are fulfilled is categorically unknown, but evidence suggests they are particularly vulnerable, in comparison both to boys and to other girls.

41. While they must assume adult responsibilities, children in child-headed households may not have the same legal rights as adults. Their country's laws and policies may not protect children's property or inheritance rights, or assist them to enforce the rights they do have. In addition, they often do not possess important documentation, including the birth, marriage or death certificates that might protect their right to inherit their parents' property. Girls are even less likely to be protected by laws than boys. While some country constitutions specifically recognize gender equality and prohibit discrimination, "customary laws" often take precedence, under which women are entitled to a lesser share than male relatives or are dispossessed of family property altogether.

42. Children in child-headed households may experience feelings of loneliness and abandonment. They may be traumatized, having watched their parents die slow and painful deaths. They may be subject to discrimination and alienation due to positive HIV status, either their deceased parents' or their own. They may inherit their parents' financial debts or may incur their own debt to neighbours and be unable to repay them. These types of experiences expose children to high levels of psychosocial stress, and girls have been found to be more vulnerable than boys.

43. Children from child-headed households are even more disadvantaged and less able to access critical services than other poor children. They are more likely to be malnourished, less likely to be able to meet basic material needs — items such as blankets, shoes or clothing[15] — and face difficulties accessing public services. Exhausted by the demands of caring for siblings, performing household chores and earning income, along with their de facto caregiving responsibilities, girls are particularly prone to stop going to school or sporadic attendance.

44. Parents or other trusted family members would be expected to help children to understand puberty and other developmental and emotional changes that occur during adolescence, so children who lack this support are less likely to be informed about health issues, family planning and protection from sexually transmitted

[15] UNICEF, *Progress Report for Children Affected by HIV/AIDS*, 2009.

diseases, including HIV. They are also less likely to approach health care professionals for information, condoms or needed medical treatment.

45. Evidence from several African countries suggests that girls heading households may feel forced to perform sexual favours in exchange for money, basic goods or protection. While such relationships may seem consensual, young women may have more difficulty refusing or negotiating safe sex when they are concerned with survival and meeting their basic material needs.

46. The desperate need to make money renders child-headed households more susceptible to economic exploitation, hazardous work, forced labour and physical abuse. More than one quarter of the detected victims of trafficking are children, and two of every three trafficked children are girls.[16] They are often less empowered than boys, both socially and physically, and are even more vulnerable when they lack the oversight of caring adults.

47. Addressing the rights of girl children in child-headed households is critical to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and contributes to implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It also corresponds with the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (A/HRC/11/L.13), which stipulate that, support and services should be available to siblings who have lost their parents or caregivers and choose to remain together in their household, to the extent that the eldest sibling is both willing and deemed capable of acting as the household head.

48. In 2013, a handbook was launched to help Governments to implement the internationally agreed standards and principles articulated in the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. Based on input of Governments, NGOs, United Nations agencies and academia, and field tested in Argentina and Malawi, the handbook explores implications of the guidelines for policymakers, points to opportunities for leadership and provides insights for employing principles within contexts of limited resources.

49. In cases where children remain in households without parental care, strengthening their capacity to provide and care for themselves and their families is crucial. Interventions have taken several forms. The Government of Zimbabwe, for example, has intervened at household level, enabling child-headed households to access financial and social services. Junior Farmer and Field Life Schools, established by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), combine agricultural education and skills training with promotion of decent and gender-equitable rural employment. The aim is to make participants aware of their labour and property rights while gaining important life skills in nutrition, health and protection from HIV. Increased self-reliance empowers children to fulfil their own needs, enables them to make better decisions and reduces their susceptibility to manipulation and exploitation.

50. In some cases, building community capacities can prevent the need for children to live by themselves and can empower communities to act as a support system. SOS Children's Villages International collaborates with organizations in Ethiopia, Uganda and Zimbabwe to build family and economic capacity and the

[16] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2012*, 2012.

skills of communities to provide social support to families at risk of abandoning children. In China, the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women supports the Beijing Cultural Development Center for Rural Women to prevent violence against girls whose parents have migrated to cities for work. Recognizing the girls' vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse, the Center trains guardians, teachers, police officers and medical professionals to better protect girls and to identify physical and mental trauma among children who have been abused or abandoned.

51. The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children help to enable children to remain together as a household and safeguard their rights. The Guidelines call for legal frameworks to protect the rights of children to land, health and education when there is no possibility for children to live in an adult-headed household. States should ensure the existence of a legally mandated public body to act as guardian, so that child-headed households are protected from all forms of exploitation and abuse and receive support and social services from the community. States should also address daily deprivations such as the lack of food, as well as loss of social interaction, which causes long-term exclusion and exploitation.

52. The scale and severity of risks relating to girls in child-headed households have yet to be adequately examined or addressed. This is due largely to the lack of statistics and information, and it underlines the importance of having a clearer definition and more thorough understanding of such households. Internationally agreed criteria should determine whether a household is classified as child-headed and national surveys should count these households and include sex- and age-disaggregated data on them.

53. Because girls and boys face different challenges and employ different coping strategies, Government policies must be informed by gender-specific information. Girls with experience in child-headed households should be involved in research and planning to better articulate the experiences and perspectives that have yet to be fully examined.

54. Governments should ensure that girls who head households are legally recognized, with birth registration, land and property ownership rights, and access to legal representation. Legislation should ensure that they can access financial, social and health services and take measures to reduce the likelihood that they will be forced to leave or miss school. Girls in child-headed households are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, so addressing household poverty is critical. Interventions can include subsidies to lower the cost of living, enhanced business and training opportunities to strengthen financial capacity, and scholarships to enable continued education.

55. Interventions at the community level should prioritize socialization of children, raise human rights awareness and encourage community dialogue and information sharing, ultimately to build trust and solidarity. Social protection measures should be established to strengthen community systems, enhance peer support and better protect girls from violence.

V. Progress and achievements

56. Progress has been made in a number of areas with respect to promoting the rights of girls and implementing General Assembly resolution 66/140. Some key achievements are outlined below.

A. Strengthening of legal frameworks and commitments

57. Numerous States have adopted laws, policies, action plans and strategies to address the multiple forms of violence against girls, such as human trafficking, sexual violence and exploitation, female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage. In addition, the institutional response to violence and exploitation has been strengthened through coordination and capacity-building in the social welfare, justice, education and health sectors.

58. Since the December 2011 adoption of General Assembly resolution 66/139 on strengthening collaboration on child protection within the United Nations system, and resolution 66/140 on the girl child, 11 States became parties and one State became signatory to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; 35 States signed and 3 States ratified or acceded to the Optional Protocol on a communications procedure; and 7 States became parties to the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission has specifically called upon countries to sign and/or ratify the latter Optional Protocol and to incorporate its provisions into national legislation, criminalizing the recruitment of minors.

59. ILO Convention No. 189, "Decent work for domestic workers", represents a major milestone in regulating issues surrounding decent work and providing a foundation for the development of legal and policy frameworks geared towards the elimination of domestic child labour. Within just over a year of its adoption in 2011, Mauritius, the Philippines and Uruguay ratified the Convention, and at least 20 other countries have initiated ratification procedures or are taking steps in that direction.

B. Joint initiatives

60. The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Adolescent Girls supports Governments and civil society in developing countries to advocate for targeted, comprehensive policies and programmes to empower the hardest-to-reach girls, especially marginalized adolescent girls aged 10 to 14. Joint programmes are under way in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia and Malawi. The task force is co-chaired by UNICEF and UNFPA and includes ILO, UNESCO, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), and WHO.

61. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative collaborates with a range of partners and networks to maximize resources and results for girls' education and gender equality. In 2012, the Initiative strengthened its collaboration with the Global Partnership for Education to support development, implementation and monitoring of gender-responsive education sector plans in participating countries.

62. The Together for Girls initiative, a global private-public partnership including the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), UNFPA, UNICEF, UN-Women, WHO, the United States Government and members of the private sector, works to bring an end to violence against children and, in particular, sexual violence against girls. A hallmark of Together for Girls' work are nationwide, population-based household surveys designed to determine the prevalence of and circumstances surrounding emotional, physical and sexual violence against males and females under 18 years of age and prevalence of violence in the past 12 months.

63. The United Nations Development Programme, ILO, UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and WHO are partnering to improve guidance and policy cohesion on young people from key populations, including girls who are survivors of human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

C. Improvement in sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis

64. Comprehensive data disaggregated by sex and age enable United Nations agencies, Member States and NGOs to better understand situations, cite areas requiring intervention and determine which resources and actions are required to address challenges appropriately. These data also allow for monitoring and evaluation of progress so that programmes and actions can be adapted and improved, as necessary.

65. In 2011, UNICEF issued the report entitled "Boys and girls in the life cycle", a compilation of sex-disaggregated statistics revealing that, while gender disparities in education, health and protection are relatively small in early childhood, gaps increase significantly in adolescence. In 2012, UNFPA released a report entitled "Marrying too young: end child marriage". It documented the scope, prevalence and inequities associated with child marriage and made projections on the number of girls who would be married by their eighteenth birthday. Responding to General Assembly resolution 66/140, UNICEF recently released a new report on female genital mutilation/cutting. It includes data representing 29 countries where the practice is concentrated and data on attitudes and circumstances surrounding it. The Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs compiled data on legal age at marriage in 195 countries and presented it in its "World Fertility Policies 2011" wallchart.[17]

66. As a means to promote more consistent statistics on the well-being of girls and women across countries and regions, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics has identified a set of 52 gender indicators for global reporting. The United Nations Statistics Division has finalized guidelines for producing, analysing and disseminating statistics on violence against girls and women.

D. Strengthening of education

67. The Global Partnership for Education envisions a good-quality education for all children everywhere. It provides strong incentives and technical and financial support to developing country partners to include gender strategies in their

[17] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.11.XIII.5.

education plans. Currently, 68 per cent of girls in partnership countries finish primary school, compared with 56 per cent in 2002, and 18 partner countries now have as many girls as boys completing primary school.

68. Australia, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil and Denmark, among other countries, have been identified as "champions" in their support of the Secretary-General's Global Education First Initiative. Launched in 2012 as a means to renew and reinvigorate global commitments to education, the Initiative focuses on putting every child in school, improving the quality of learning and fostering global citizenship. UNICEF supports these objectives by ensuring that education opportunities are available to the most vulnerable groups, including girls, children with disabilities and children living in conflict zones.

69. Global enrolment rates among refugee children are generally low, and among refugee girls they are even lower. Gender disparities are particularly marked in some parts of South Asia and in Eastern Africa, including the Horn of Africa, where girls are less likely than boys to attend primary school. The 2012-2016 education strategy of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which has been rolled out in 20 priority countries, employs targeted interventions to enrol girls, monitor their attendance and ensure their school completion.

E. Improvements in health and HIV prevention

70. In most regions, in the aggregate, girls and boys are equally likely to be immunized against measles, to be breastfed, to benefit from malaria interventions and to receive proper care for diarrhoeal diseases and pneumonia — the two leading causes of under-five deaths. However, gender differences exist within and across countries.

71. There is improvement in adolescent girls' access to reproductive health services in some countries. The Government of Italy, for example, has improved access to contraceptives, specifically focusing on girls under the age of 15. Contraception and reproductive rights are core elements of sexual education modules in Mexico, and the Government has also implemented policies aimed at reducing maternal mortality. In 2012, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees supported the Government of Malaysia in the provision of reproductive health counselling services for child brides.

72. HIV risk is frequently aggravated by gender inequality, meaning that comprehensive responses must address prevailing social dynamics. In Malawi, the Coalition of Women Living with HIV/AIDS has used an evidence-based approach to challenge gender norms, resulting in increased condom use and a decline in gender-based violence. The Malawi programme challenges gender inequality through effective communication and by work to catalyse a transition from a male-centred approach to decision-making in the intimate realm to a couple-centred one in which the sexual and reproductive health needs and rights of both women and men are respected. Among the strengths of the initiative are the engagement of men on issues of gender-based violence; the strengthening of linkages between community leaders and support groups; and the community dialogue approach to raising awareness on the harmful practices and entrenched gender norms that predispose women to HIV infection, sexual and reproductive health abuses, violence and stigma. The

Government of Mauritania also reports that prevention and HIV testing campaigns target girls and women.

73. The Government of Japan, in its support to the global work on HIV and AIDS, is promoting an integrated approach of combining efforts to combat infectious diseases, including HIV and AIDS, with strengthening of health systems and improvement of maternal and child health, including prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. This effort is based on its Global Health Policy 2011-2015 and was announced at the United Nations High-level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals, in September 2010.

F. Improvements in access to water, sanitation and hygiene

74. Efforts continue to bring water closer to the home so that girls do not miss school or risk being harmed while walking long distances to collect water. According to a 2010 World Bank study, "in countries where substantial gender gaps in schooling exist, both boys' and girls' enrolments improve with better access to water". The study revealed, for example, that "a one-hour reduction in the time to [access] water would increase girls' and boys' enrolment rates by about 8 or 9 per cent in Yemen and by 18 to 19 per cent in Pakistan".[18] New behaviour change approaches, which encourage communities to end open defecation and improve sanitation, have resulted in record numbers of people using private household toilets. Further, concerted efforts are being made to address the lack of water, sanitation and hygiene in schools. UNICEF, NGOs and other organizations are working to address the issue of menstrual hygiene management, including a focus on sex-segregated toilet facilities in schools.

G. Approaches to addressing violence against girls

75. Efforts to decrease violence, exploitation and abuse of girls complement rights-based legislation with responsive social services and interventions. In 2009, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East defined a multisectoral approach to address gender-based violence across its fields of operations. It also established referral mechanisms to detect survivors of gender-based violence and provide them with services, including health care, psychosocial support and legal advice. In addition, a comprehensive electronic case management system has been launched to ensure better follow-up of refugees seeking assistance due to gender-based violence.

76. In Rwanda, key line ministries have officially approved the Revised Protocol on the Multi-Sectoral Management of Sexual Abuse and Violence of Survivors, which articulates minimum standards of care for children and women across the justice, health, security, education, welfare, youth and media sectors. A similar protocol for victims of gender-based violence has been signed in Sierra Leone. Malta is currently in the process of ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

[18] G. Koolwal and D. van de Walle, *Access to Water, Women's Work and Child Outcomes*, Policy Research Working Paper No. 5302, World Bank, 2010.

Perpetrators of domestic violence are required to attend support groups and address the harmful beliefs that underlie their actions.

H. Efforts to end harmful practices

77. In 2012, the first International Day of the Girl Child drew specific attention to the practice of child marriage. The Executive Directors of UNICEF, UNFPA and UN-Women issued a joint statement calling for dedicated resources to accelerate efforts to end child marriage, and UNFPA committed an additional $20 million to reach the most marginalized adolescent girls in 12 countries with high prevalence of child marriage. In the same year, in its resolution 2012/1, the Commission on Population and Development urged Member States to enact and strictly enforce laws concerning the minimum legal age of consent and the minimum age for marriage.

78. Member States have made notable efforts to address harmful practices. In the Niger, which has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world, initiatives include awareness-raising, safe spaces and education programmes targeted at parents, young girls and those in positions of influence. In Germany, new legislation has been passed to prevent forced marriage and better protect victims.

79. By 2012, female genital mutilation/cutting had been abandoned by approximately 10,000 communities in countries covered by the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting. In Somalia, where almost all women have experienced some form of the practice, a new Constitution outlaws all forms of it. In partnership with Save the Children and local NGOs and ministries, the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women empowers women themselves to stop the practice in the Gambia, Guinea, Mali and Senegal. In Mauritania, a fatwa against female genital mutilation/cutting encourages voluntary abandonment, and a zero-tolerance campaign has been launched in some of the most highly affected areas.

I. Efforts to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation

80. Various measures to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation have been employed by Member States. In The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, for example, a website has been established for reporting sexual abuse of children and to encourage sexually abused children to report their own experiences. Viet Nam has developed a National Plan of Action against Sexual Exploitation of Children. Japan has been promoting measures to prevent access to images of child pornography on the Internet, and Spain has employed new technologies to detect and prosecute international child pornography networks.

J. Efforts to build peaceful societies

81. UNICEF, the Government of the Netherlands and other key partners support the Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy Programme (2012-2015) in 13 priority countries. The programme targets children and adolescents, with a specific focus on girls, to prevent and resolve conflicts and address gender-based violence and rights violations of girls and women in conflict-affected countries.

82. The Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund is supporting a number of UNICEF-led projects in post-conflict countries that benefit the girl child, such as projects on child protection, child rights, education, sexual violence and reintegration. In Nepal, for example, the Peacebuilding Fund has supported Government efforts to combat child rights violations, with particular emphasis on recognition of sexual violence as a tool of conflict. It also provided comprehensive services to women and girl victims of sexual violence.

K. Inclusion of marginalized girls

83. Participants at the 2013 fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women agreed on the need for targeted attention to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. In response to concerns expressed by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities regarding the situation of women and girls with disabilities, a working group on article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will analyse information submitted during the general debate. The working group will then draft a general comment on matters including restrictions to sexual, reproductive and maternity rights of girls with disabilities and the failure to include gender as a cross-cutting issue in public policies.

84. UN-Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, ILO and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children recently launched a study entitled "Breaking the silence on violence against indigenous girls, adolescents and young women: a call to action based on an overview of existing evidence from Africa, Asia Pacific and Latin America". The study contributes to knowledge on the nature, prevalence, incidence and consequences of violence affecting indigenous girls, adolescents and youth. Preliminary results of the study had served as a substantive technical contribution to the January 2012 expert group meeting on "Combating violence against indigenous women and girls: article 22 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples", the (2012) eleventh session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

VI. Recommendations

85. The examples above demonstrate significant progress, and these efforts must be continuously enhanced and expanded. This demands decisive action from Governments; support from development agencies, NGOs and civil society; and the active engagement of girls, boys, men and women.

A. Use of evidence to inform the promotion of girls' rights

86. Girl children are more likely to have reduced access to education, to experience vulnerabilities and discrimination, and to be exposed to sexual exploitation and abuse and domestic labour. Better understanding of the underlying social and economic determinants of these and other deprivations is critical. Identifying the causal factors at national and local levels should inform the design of appropriate programmatic responses. Experience shows that specific, evidence-based interventions have pronounced impacts in terms of girls' access to health care

and education; improvements in nutrition outcomes; use of maternal health services; delayed marriage; reduction in self-reported sexual activity (particularly transactional); increased contraceptive use and risk prevention; and reduction in exploited labour activity.

87. Policies and programmes should aim to expand the life choices available to girls and contribute to the development of girls and their communities. In addition, data analysis should be used to identify and target geographic "hot spots" where high proportions and numbers of adolescent girls are particularly at risk of leaving school, marrying early and becoming heads of households.

B. Implementation of inclusive policies

88. Because some groups of girls are less visible within their societies, States should make deliberate, formalized efforts to ensure the inclusion of girls from child-headed households, girls who are displaced, girls in prison, girls with disabilities, indigenous girls and other marginalized groups. Specifically, States should implement inclusive policies for decision-making processes at all levels and seek the input of marginalized girls in policy and programme design.

C. Need to address gender inequality in education as a matter of urgency

89. Inequalities will not be reduced and interventions will not be sustainable without first addressing educational inequalities. Lessons learned in countries that have met the second and third Goals of the Millennium Development Goals indicate that solutions must be adapted to each country context. However, successful approaches should include, in principle:

(a) Improvements to the educational system, recognizing free and compulsory education as a judiciable right, supported by evidence-based planning and monitoring, good financing systems, healthy budgets, minimal barriers to access and attention to quality;

(b) Targeted interventions to improve girls' enrolment, primary completion, progression into secondary school and improved learning outcomes, including early childhood development and social protection measures, such as cash transfers and scholarships;

(c) Sustained political commitment to girls' equity, from subnational levels to the highest levels of Government, and across political parties;

(d) Community-based interventions that increase the likelihood of parents supporting their daughters' right to education and strengthen their participation at all levels.

90. Accelerated progress in girls' education requires sustained effort to ensure that their actual experiences in school and their status within their families and communities are addressed through responsive policies and strategies. Further, greater attention is needed to promote relevant skills development among girls, including investments in social networking and innovations relating to science

technology and engineering, to make the effective transition from school to work in a fast-changing knowledge-based economy.

D. Improvements in girls' health and nutrition

91. Improving girls' health and nutrition yields many social and economic benefits for girls and their families, breaking the cycle of ill health and the intergenerational transmission of malnutrition, gender discrimination and poverty. Healthy and well-nourished girls become more capable citizens and workers.

92. Governments and partners should ensure girls' access to health and nutrition information and services, including sexual and reproductive health and HIV testing and affordable treatment. They also should promote and expand coverage of focused health and nutrition interventions for girls, especially the poorest. In addition, health sector policies, service delivery and financing arrangements should be reviewed and modified to respond to girls' specific health needs.

93. Programmes should be supported to create safe spaces for girls to build their social, economic and health assets to reduce their vulnerabilities and to overcome the discrimination and challenges they face. Adolescent girls must be provided with comprehensive sexuality education to develop the knowledge and skills they need to protect their health throughout their lives. Such education can be provided by schools and in communities and combined with skills training and promotion of human rights and gender equality. Creative solutions to raise coverage of interventions such as iron-folate supplementation for girls and women of childbearing age and during pregnancy must be pursued so that these interventions can be strengthened and rapidly accelerated.

E. Understanding of gender norms in informing policy design

94. For the rights of girls to be fully respected and fulfilled within society, it is essential that they not only be inscribed into legislation but also be promoted by comprehensive prevention and response mechanisms. Understanding the way gender norms affect violence, exploitation and abuse of children should be used to more directly inform the design of policies and interventions to improve the survival, development and participation of the girl child and to ensure realization of her rights.

95. Because social discrimination can impede individuals from enjoying the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled, policies do not necessarily lead to the same outcome for all people. By recognizing specific forms of discrimination and the way they intersect with gender, policies can be more specifically tailored to achieve their intended goals and accommodate girls, who might otherwise be excluded.

F. Support to empower girls to participate fully and freely

96. Research shows that providing girls with skills, knowledge, meaningful connections with others and a say in processes and decisions that affect them significantly contributes to improving their lives. As set out in general comment No. 12 (2009), it is important that accountability mechanisms be introduced and

promoted to provide appropriate information and adequate support for children to express their views in matters that affect them, as called for by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The participation of girls should be promoted by involving them in the design and delivery of development programmes intended to reach them.